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VIP

Frank Terpil in The Starring Role

By Maxine Cheshire

THERE WAS a time, before he fled the country to avoid prosecution as an alleged trainer of terrorists, that soldier of fortune Frank Terpil thought he'd sell his life story to the movies, with his role being played by Burt Reynolds.

Now, it turns out, Terpil may play Terpil, because the British film-making team that has been pursuing him more doggedly than Interpol has decided the story has too much immediacy to waste time with dramatization and fictionalization.

So they're going to a documentary format, and a crew just got back from Lebanon or Syria or wherever it is that the peripatetic Terpil was holed up last week.

Everybody is being very mysterious and hush-hush, with a producer and a writer and a researcher all huddling at the Mayflower Hotel here over the weekend.

Federal prosecutors wanted to talk to them about whether they had actually seen and talked to the elusive Terpil. There is particular interest in whether or not he allowed himself to be filmed because there have been reports from

his former CIA buddies that he recently underwent plastic surgery to alter his appearance.

The media has also been tracking the production crew because of another story circulating that Terpil, a CIA operative before he became an international arms merchant, has turned over to his biographers documents that are going to embarrass the agency if nothing else.

Among the papers is supposed to be a never-before-revealed list of companies that were CIA fronts.

The Terpil story is being produced by the team that stirred up a storm of controversy in the Middle East with the docudrama, "Death of a Princess," about a teen-age member of the Saudi Arabian royal family who was executed for a Romeo-and-Juliet relationship which was considered adultery.

Antony Thomas and David Fanning, who co-authored the Saudi saga, are doing the Terpil story for the public television station in Boston, WGBH, and one of the independent companies in Britain.

Washington author Jim Hougan, the Harper's magazine bureau chief whose best-selling "Spooks" is almost a textbook source on the subject of spies-for-hire, is supposed to be one of the few people in the world trusted by Terpil and may take a brief hiatus from his encyclopedic "new-look-at-Watergate" book project to act as coordinator-consultant.

Meanwhile, over at the Navy Yard, if former CIA director Stansfield Turner spends much time worrying about Terpil, he doesn't do it past 4:30 p.m.

Turner, working on an oral history of his years in the Navy, has turned into a real clock-watcher.

The classified documents he has been culling in his research are kept in vaults which are locked promptly every afternoon.

The other day, the lights went out and a preoccupied Turner realized that meant he was about to be locked up overnight.

Turner's frantic scurrying and loud pleas for the guards to "Wait... wait!" averted disaster, according to a Turner aide.

Turner is "only kidding" when he tells people he spent the night there, his executive assistant said last week. "But the guards check now every night to make sure we're out," he added.